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DOI:

[10.1016/j.chest.2017.09.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chest.2017.09.005)

*Document Version*

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Pfeffer, P. E., & Hawrylowicz, C. M. (2017). Translating Basic Research into Clinical Practice: Vitamin D in Asthma – Mechanisms of Action and Considerations for Clinical Trials. *Chest*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chest.2017.09.005>

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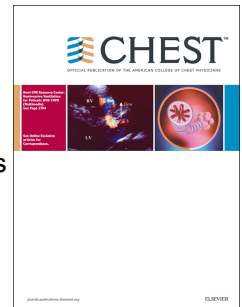
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# Accepted Manuscript

Translating Basic Research into Clinical Practice: Vitamin D in Asthma – Mechanisms of Action and Considerations for Clinical Trials

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PII: S0012-3692(17)32697-1

DOI: [10.1016/j.chest.2017.09.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chest.2017.09.005)

Reference: CHEST 1328

To appear in: *CHEST*

Received Date: 9 May 2017

Revised Date: 15 August 2017

Accepted Date: 6 September 2017

Please cite this article as: Pfeffer PE, Hawrylowicz CM, Translating Basic Research into Clinical Practice: Vitamin D in Asthma – Mechanisms of Action and Considerations for Clinical Trials, *CHEST* (2017), doi: 10.1016/j.chest.2017.09.005.

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# **Translating Basic Research into Clinical Practice:**

## **Vitamin D in Asthma – Mechanisms of Action and Considerations for Clinical Trials**

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### **Keywords:**

asthma, vitamin D, airway immunology, T helper cells

### **Acknowledgements:**

This review was written jointly by both authors.

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

### **Abbreviations:**

1,25(OH) <sub>2</sub> D <sub>3</sub>	1,25 di-hydroxyvitamin D <sub>3</sub>
25(OH)D	25-hydroxyvitamin D
DC	dendritic cell
IL-	interleukin-
ILC	innate lymphoid cell
Th	helper CD4+ T lymphocyte

**Abstract**

There is increasing interest in the therapeutic utility of vitamin D in asthma, supported by a significant body of evidence on epidemiological associations between vitamin D insufficiency and worse asthma control. In support of a causal relationship, vitamin D beneficially modulates diverse immunological pathways in heterogeneous asthma endotypes, regulating the actions of lymphocytes, mast cells, antigen-presenting cells and structural cells to dampen excessive inflammatory responses.

Allergic asthma is characterised by a failure of immune tolerance, and development of pathological responses to inhaled aeroallergens, and vitamin D has been extensively shown to support immune regulation. Alarmin cytokines are increasingly implicated in non-allergic eosinophilic inflammation, which vitamin D also regulates. Steroid-resistance and pathological IL-17 responses are features of severe asthma, and vitamin D beneficially enhances the response to steroids in these individuals. Additionally, vitamin D enhances anti-microbial pathways, of relevance to infection-precipitated asthma exacerbations. These mechanisms support a role for vitamin D as secondary prevention to reduce exacerbations and inflammation in asthma. Similar mechanisms, and effects on fetal lung development, likely underlie a primary prevention therapeutic role in pregnancy for vitamin D to reduce the development of asthma in children.

However, randomised controlled trials of variable design show inconsistent positive outcomes for vitamin D interventions in asthma. Increased understanding of vitamin D biology reveals methodological issues that might explain certain negative outcomes. Importantly, on systematic review of the trials to-date, vitamin D is beneficial in asthma. The evidence

70 discussed in this review supports the importance of optimising vitamin D in holistic asthma  
71 care.

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**Manuscript**

The importance of vitamin D in human health is well established, however, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century its actions were only considered influential in calcium and phosphate homeostasis. We have now come to realise that vitamin D has profound paracrine actions throughout the body and in particular to have major effects on the immune system.<sup>1 2</sup> There is a current epidemic of vitamin D insufficiency<sup>3</sup> - in humans the most important source for vitamin D precursors starts with conversion in the skin of 7-dehydrocholesterol to D3 in a reaction requiring solar ultraviolet B radiation, and reduced exposure to sunlight in our modern lifestyle is thought responsible for the high prevalence of vitamin D insufficiency.<sup>1 3</sup> As part of evolving vitamin D research over the last 15 years there has been intense interest in the role vitamin D may play in airway health and homeostasis, and the effect of vitamin D deficiency on airways pathology. In this review we discuss evidence for vitamin D insufficiency / deficiency contributing to asthma pathology and evidence that vitamin D supplementation should be considered part of holistic treatment of asthma.

Epidemiological research has revealed strong, significant associations between diverse aspects of asthma pathology and reduced levels of serum 25-hydroxyvitamin (25(OH)D) vitamin D, the major circulating precursor, which is commonly used as a measure of vitamin D status. Cross-sectional studies have consistently found more severe asthma in patients with lower vitamin D levels (Table of studies and discussion in Mann *et al.* 2014<sup>4</sup>). Similar associations seen in other diseases has led to vigorous discussion about whether these associations are due to causation or reverse-causation. Three streams of evidence strongly support causation i.e. that reduced levels of circulating vitamin D can contribute to more severe asthma disease: prospective epidemiological evidence, mechanistic research and vitamin D supplementation studies.

Nevertheless reverse-causation (that asthma itself leads to decreased vitamin D levels) is also likely to be true with reduced time spent outside in more severe asthma and the likelihood that asthmatic inflammation is vitamin D consumptive, as has been shown for other types of inflammation.<sup>5</sup> We propose that there is a complex relationship between vitamin D insufficiency and asthmatic pathology, with a vicious circle of causation and reverse-causation, leading to progressive worsening of asthma, and that this cycle may be broken by including vitamin D supplementation in asthma care. As discussed below this evidence supports a therapeutic role for vitamin D as secondary prevention in asthmatic patients to reduce asthma exacerbations and also airway inflammation with remodelling.

### **Prospective epidemiological evidence**

Most vitamin D epidemiological studies have been cross-sectional, comparing vitamin D levels to recent asthma control, and therefore more vulnerable to reverse-causation. Few studies have compared vitamin D levels to future asthma control. However, for example, Brehm *et al.* (2010) have reported an association between baseline serum vitamin D status and risk of a severe exacerbation over the following 4 years in children enrolled into the Childhood Asthma Management Program study.<sup>6</sup> After adjustment for other variables, including physician judged asthma severity, patients with baseline vitamin D insufficiency (< 30 ng/ml) had higher odds of an asthma exacerbation requiring hospitalisation or Emergency Department attendance over the follow-up period.

### **Mechanistic Research**

Translational research over the last 15 years has shown vitamin D to have a major role in regulating immunological responses. Such a role is not surprising given the high frequency of vitamin D response elements in cells of the immune system such as CD4 T lymphocytes.<sup>7</sup> The

immunology of asthma is complex and the disease heterogeneous – we are increasingly aware that multiple independent pathological mechanisms can lead to asthmatic inflammation and that the relative contribution of the pathways will differ from individual to individual patient. These pathways interact and subdivisions described below are to aid discussion. Importantly, vitamin D has beneficial actions at multiple steps in all these proposed pathways. Furthermore, chronic uncontrolled asthmatic inflammation leads to airway remodelling - this is also reduced by vitamin D, likely through its actions on structural cells, as further discussed below.

### **Aero-allergen triggered asthma**

Classically asthmatic inflammation was thought primarily due to antigen-dependent immune responses to aeroallergens, with Th2 lymphocytes, IgE-secreting B lymphocytes and mast cells featuring prominently in this patho-mechanism (Figure 1). Naive T lymphocytes become inappropriately primed to respond to otherwise-innocuous inhaled aeroallergens with Th2 polarity, and upon re-stimulation by inhaled aeroallergens produce the Th2 cytokines IL-4, IL-5 and IL-13 that promote asthma pathology. IL-4 promotes class-switching of B lymphocytes to IgE production. Aero-allergen specific IgE is produced by these B lymphocytes and coats mast cells. Then on inhalation of aeroallergens the IgE upon mast cells becomes cross-linked leading to rapid release of further pro-inflammatory asthma mediators such as leukotrienes and histamine that cause bronchoconstriction and airway mucus production.

At the core of this mechanism is a failure of suppression of inappropriate antigen-dependent immune responses to aeroallergens. Adaptive immune responses are regulated by diverse classes of regulatory T lymphocyte (Treg), for example Foxp3 expressing and IL-10 secreting Tregs, and their coordinated action in healthy individuals ensures tolerance to non-harmful



antigens. There is an abundance of evidence that vitamin D plays a vital role in Treg responses.

<sup>8</sup> Our laboratory has previously shown *in vivo* vitamin D status positively correlates with the frequency of Foxp3<sup>+</sup> Tregs <sup>9</sup> and airway levels of IL-10 <sup>10</sup> in asthma patients. *In vitro* 1,25(OH)<sub>2</sub>D<sub>3</sub> promotes distinct IL-10 and Foxp3 expressing CD4<sup>+</sup> T cell populations, which is influenced by the local cytokine milieu. <sup>9</sup> In addition to Tregs, adaptive immune responses are also regulated through other mechanisms. In particular, the quality of antigen presentation and expression of co-stimulatory signals by dendritic cells (DCs) is important in determining tolerogenic versus inflammatory immune responses. Multiple facets of DC activity are regulated by vitamin D, including antigen presentation and co-stimulatory signals, to promote tolerogenic DCs. <sup>11</sup>

As well as promoting appropriate antigen tolerance, vitamin D also modulates other aspects of allergen-stimulated immune responses. Vitamin D can suppress production of IgE by human B lymphocytes *in vitro* and increase IL-10 production, promoting a regulatory B lymphocyte phenotype. <sup>12 13</sup> Notably, in children vitamin D deficiency is associated with increased levels of aeroallergen specific IgE. <sup>14 15</sup> Additionally, vitamin D has been shown to have the capacity to suppress mast cell activation, reducing histamine and TNF $\alpha$  release for example, including in the context of IgE-dependent activation. <sup>16 17</sup> Vitamin D can also promote mast cell production of anti-inflammatory IL-10. <sup>18</sup>

In support of these actions of vitamin D being significant, Heine and colleagues have shown in a ovalbumin-sensitisation model that vitamin D deficient mice have higher levels of ovalbumin-specific IgE. <sup>19</sup> Addition of vitamin D to a desensitisation protocol further reduced airways concentrations of IL-4 and IL-13 post aerosolised ovalbumin challenge, and also further reduced airways hyper-responsiveness. <sup>19</sup>

### Epithelial damage and Alarmin cytokine elicited asthmatic inflammation

There is increasing interest in the mechanisms underpinning non-allergic asthma. Epithelial damage is now understood to prompt release of cytokines known as Alarmins – e.g. IL-25, IL-33 and TSLP – that directly stimulate multiple cell types including type-2 innate lymphoid cells (ILC2s) and mast cells.<sup>20</sup> These stimulated ILC2s then produce Th2-type cytokines including IL-5, which in turn promotes eosinophilic inflammation (Figure 2). Of these Alarmins, IL-33 appears particularly important in asthma with both its gene (*IL33*) and the gene for its receptor (*IL1RL1*) identified in asthma GWAS studies.<sup>21</sup>

Vitamin D has been shown to modulate the epithelial response to stimulation with a potentially anti-inflammatory role for this action.<sup>22</sup> However, of specific relevance to asthma is the capacity of vitamin D to stimulate bronchial epithelial cell production of sST2, a soluble decoy blocker for IL-33, and for this epithelial-produced sST2 to decrease the pro-inflammatory effect of IL-33 on target cells such as mast cells.<sup>23</sup>

There is relatively little evidence as to the effect of vitamin D on ILC2s and eosinophils. Ethier *et al.* have shown vitamin D to be able to enhance eosinophil viability with reduced production of pro-inflammatory necrotic granules.<sup>24</sup> Ruiter and colleagues have shown vitamin D to reduce pro-inflammatory cytokine production by stimulated ILC2s.<sup>25</sup>

Viral infections in particular trigger epithelial IL-33 release,<sup>26</sup> which is important given that Th2-biased asthmatic pathology has been shown to impair appropriate anti-viral immune responses.<sup>27</sup> Indeed asthma exacerbations are frequently associated with viral respiratory tract infections. Vitamin D, however, enhances antimicrobial immune responses through many

mechanisms. It enhances cellular production of antimicrobial peptides (such as cathelicidin) and autophagy, important in the response to both bacterial and viral infections.<sup>28 29 30</sup> Consistent with these actions of vitamin D, meta-analysis has shown vitamin D supplementation of appropriate patients to reduce acute respiratory tract infections.<sup>31</sup>

## **Steroid-resistant asthma and IL-17**

In a proportion of patients with the most severe asthma the pathology appears to have some distinct features, in particular corticosteroid-resistance and an apparent pathological role for IL-17. Multiple pathways to steroid-resistance in airways disease have been described.<sup>32</sup> Airway colonisation with pro-inflammatory bacteria such as *Haemophilus influenza*, oxidative stress (for example from air pollution) and vitamin D deficiency itself are major contenders for causing acquired steroid-resistance in asthma. Vitamin D enhances anti-microbial pathways and vitamin D also promotes anti-oxidant responses.<sup>33</sup> Additionally vitamin D ameliorates steroid-resistant inflammation through its direct actions on lymphocytes (as discussed below) and monocytes.<sup>34</sup> Steroid-insensitive asthmatics have impaired steroid-induced production of anti-inflammatory IL-10. *In vitro* vitamin D enhances steroid-induced lymphocyte production of IL-10 and supplementation of steroid-resistant asthmatic patients with the calcitriol form of vitamin D restores both the clinical and immunological IL-10 response to corticosteroids.<sup>35 36 37</sup> Furthermore, we have shown that corticosteroids actually promote in steroid-resistant individuals production of IL-17, thought in this context to cause pathological neutrophilic inflammation, with amelioration after vitamin D supplementation.<sup>37</sup> Subramanian and colleagues have recently reported vitamin D to reduce production of pro-inflammatory cytokines by stimulated neutrophils.<sup>38</sup> However vitamin D did enhance the anti-bacterial activity of neutrophils, via enhanced production of antimicrobial peptides rather than increased production of elastase or reactive oxygen species.<sup>38</sup> These findings are

consistent with earlier findings of vitamin D responsiveness of neutrophils reported by Takahashi and colleagues.<sup>39</sup>

### **Vitamin D and airway remodelling**

The downstream effect of asthmatic immune responses, regardless of the mechanisms precipitating those responses, is airway narrowing. Over the short-term this is due to smooth muscle constriction and mucus secretion, whilst over the longer-term airway remodelling and fibrosis occur. Importantly, vitamin D has actions on airway smooth muscle including inhibiting airway smooth muscle cell proliferation.<sup>40 41</sup> Consistent with this Gupta and colleagues have previously shown airway smooth muscle volume fraction in endobronchial biopsies to negatively correlate with serum vitamin D concentrations in steroid-refractory severe paediatric patients with asthma.<sup>14</sup>

### **Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) of vitamin D to treat asthma**

Over the last few years several randomised controlled clinical trials of vitamin D therapies to improve asthma control have completed and published their findings. These studies of vitamin D as secondary prevention to reduce asthma exacerbations have reported a mixture of positive and negative results in their primary outcome measures with, nevertheless, multiple positive secondary outcome measures in some trials with negative primary outcomes. For example, the VIDA trial (Castro *et al.*), despite a negative primary outcome of time to first exacerbation, found in a responder analysis that for each 10ng/ml increase in serum 25(OH)D there was a significant reduction in the rate of treatment failures and of exacerbations.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, in a recent Cochrane Review of vitamin D for secondary prevention to reduce exacerbations in asthmatic patients, meta-analysis shows vitamin D supplementation to significantly reduce the rate of severe exacerbations in asthmatic patients.<sup>43</sup>

247

248 One possible explanation for the divergent results is under-powering in some studies and  
249 smaller effect sizes than anticipated. However, we believe that differences and limitations in  
250 study design partly explain the differences in study outcome (see Table 1). These  
251 methodological issues in vitamin D treatment trials are not specific to asthma and are worthy  
252 of detailed discussion.

253

**Table 1: Summary of major vitamin D secondary prevention RCTs in asthma**

ACT; Asthma Control Test. ATAQ; Asthma Therapy Assessment Questionnaire. FEV1; Forced Expiratory Volume in 1 second.

Trial	
<u>Study Design: Population &amp; Intervention</u>	<u>Primary (1ry) and major Secondary (2ndry) Outcomes</u>
<b>Majak <i>et al.</i> 2011 <sup>44</sup></b>	
Population: 48 children (5-18 years old) with newly diagnosed asthma.  Intervention: 500 IU D3 daily (versus placebo). In addition to inhaled steroid.	Outcomes: Significantly lower percentage of participants experiencing an asthma exacerbation in the D3 treated group. No significant difference in improvements in ATAQ score and FEV1 between the two groups.
<b>Lewis <i>et al.</i> 2012 <sup>45</sup></b>	
Population: 30 children (6-17 years age) with asthma; 97% with serum 25(OH)D < 30 ng/ml. 20 completed study (33% drop-out in both groups).  Intervention: 1000 IU D3 daily (versus placebo).	Outcomes: No significant effect of D3 therapy on either ACT score or FEV1.
<b>Yadav <i>et al.</i> 2013 <sup>46</sup></b>	
Population: 100 children (5-13 years old) with moderate to severe asthma.  Intervention: 60 000 IU D3 per month or placebo.	1ry Outcome: Significantly greater improvement in severity of asthma according to GINA guidelines at 6 months in D3 treated group.  2ndry Outcome: Significantly fewer exacerbations in the D3 treated group.
<b>Castro <i>et al.</i> 2014 (VIDA Study) <sup>42</sup></b>	
Population: 408 adult asthmatics all with serum 25(OH)D < 30 ng/ml.  Intervention: Placebo versus 100 000 IU D3 bolus dose followed by 4000 IU daily.	1ry Outcome: No significant effect on rate of first asthma treatment failure.  2ndry Outcomes: No significant effect on rate of first asthma exacerbation. Significantly greater taper of inhaled

Tapering inhaled steroids dependent on asthma control in both groups.	steroids in the D3 treated group.  In a vitamin D3 responder analysis: Rate of first exacerbation and overall exacerbation rate were both significantly lower in the D3 incremented subgroup.
<b>Martineau <i>et al.</i> 2015 (ViDiAs Study) <sup>47</sup></b>	
Population: 250 adult asthmatics; 82% with serum 25(OH)D < 75 nmol/l and 58% with serum 25(OH)D < 50 nmol/l.  Intervention: 120 000 IU D3 every two months (versus placebo).	1ry Outcome: No significant effect of D3 treatment on time to first severe asthma exacerbation or time to first upper respiratory infection. No effect modification of baseline vitamin D status on either co-primary outcome.
<b>Tachimoto <i>et al.</i> 2016 <sup>48</sup></b>	
Population: 89 schoolchildren (6-15 years age) with asthma. Median average serum 25(OH)D 29 ng/ml.  Intervention: 800 IU D3 /day or placebo.	1ry Outcome: Significantly better changes in asthma control levels as defined by GINA in D3 treated arm.

259

260 The first issue is whether vitamin D supplementation is beneficial in all patients or only  
261 beneficial where it corrects low vitamin D levels in deficient patients. Unlike in trials of  
262 pharmacologic drugs, in trials of vitamins patients at baseline have variable circulating levels  
263 of the vitamins and will have variable natural intake over the course of the trial through their  
264 normal activities of daily living. Subgroup analyses in two studies of vitamin D as a treatment  
265 for COPD have shown significant benefit from vitamin D supplementation in the subgroups of  
266 patients with marked vitamin D insufficiency (serum 25(OH)D levels < 10ng/ml and < 50  
267 nmol/l respectively for the two studies).<sup>49 50</sup> Similarly Martineau and colleagues have  
268 reported a significant interaction between baseline vitamin D status and benefit of  
269 supplementation in reducing acute respiratory tract infections, with greatest benefit in those  
270 with serum 25(OH)D < 25 nmol/l.<sup>31</sup> A major limitation of some studies may therefore be that  
271 many participants were relatively vitamin D sufficient at baseline and less likely to benefit.  
272 Not all supplemented patients in the treatment arms of these trials actually achieved vitamin D  
273 sufficiency during the trials. However, that supplementation does achieve vitamin D  
274 sufficiency appears an important determinant of benefit. In the VIDA trial approximately one  
275 fifth of participants in the vitamin D3 treatment arm did not achieve a serum 25(OH)D3  $\geq$  30  
276 ng/ml (equivalent to approximately 75 nmol/l). Although the rate of exacerbations was not  
277 significantly decreased in the overall treatment group compared to placebo, in an exploratory  
278 responder analysis when those not achieving a 25(OH)D3  $\geq$  30 ng/ml in the treatment arm  
279 were excluded then there was a significant reduction in exacerbations in the treatment arm  
280 compared to placebo.<sup>42</sup>

281 Furthermore, the optimum vitamin D level in asthma is unclear. A serum 25(OH)D3 target  
282 concentration of 75 nmol/l (30ng/ml) is often quoted but this is based on inferences from the  
283 actions of vitamin D in calcium-phosphate homeostasis.<sup>51</sup> The responder analysis from the



VIDA trial is consistent with this target,<sup>42</sup> however, that does not mean that this is necessarily the optimum target vitamin D level in asthma or for general health. There are both proponents of lower target vitamin D concentrations and high target serum levels (such as 100nmol/l 40ng/ml).<sup>51 52</sup> In support of the latter are the higher physiological ranges of vitamin D seen in some populations and emerging evidence from vitamin D trials in other medical fields.<sup>53</sup> However, although in clinical practice we assay serum 25(OH)D concentrations as a measure of patient vitamin D status, whether this is the most appropriate form to measure is uncertain. Vitamin D has a complicated metabolic pathway and it is possible that levels of a precursor or other metabolite are more important.<sup>54</sup> Additionally different actions of vitamin D may require different threshold concentrations of serum vitamin D. Finally, the bioavailability of circulating vitamin D metabolites is dependent on other factors such as circulating vitamin D binding protein (VDBP), and polymorphisms in VDBP and other vitamin D axis genes may affect the supplementation dose necessary to achieve functional vitamin D sufficiency.<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, the correct form of vitamin D to give as a supplement and correct dosing strategy is uncertain (reviewed in detail by Hollis and Wagner, 2013<sup>54</sup>). In particular, bolus vitamin D supplementation (as used in some asthma studies) may be immunologically problematic, causing large swings in serum levels and inducible homeostatic enzymes, with dysregulation of other vitamin D regulated pathways.<sup>56</sup> Indeed a recent meta-analysis of trials of vitamin D to prevent acute respiratory tract infections found regimens with regular vitamin D dosing to be associated with a protective action of vitamin D but regimens with high-dose boluses to not show protective effect.<sup>31</sup> The commonest forms of vitamin D to give as supplementation are ergocalciferol (vitamin D2) and cholecalciferol (vitamin D3) – although there is little research in to ergocalciferol supplementation in asthma by extrapolating from other diseases cholecalciferol is more likely to be beneficial than ergocalciferol.<sup>57</sup> Finally, correction of

vitamin D insufficiency through increased exposure to ultraviolet radiation may be more physiological and more effective in asthma than oral supplementation.<sup>58</sup>

Thirdly, vitamin D supplementation may be more beneficial in paediatric asthma<sup>44 48</sup> than in adult asthma.<sup>42 47</sup> Notably although Sharief and colleagues found significant associations between serum 25(OH)D and IgE sensitisation to multiple allergens in children and adolescents, significant associations were much fewer in adults.<sup>15</sup> The recent Cochrane Review of vitamin D as secondary prevention in asthma did not directly address this question, however the recent closely-related systematic review of vitamin D to prevent acute respiratory tract infections did not find a significant interaction between age and benefit of vitamin D.<sup>31</sup> A paediatric versus adult difference in benefit of vitamin D could relate to immunopathological differences in childhood onset, typically atopic asthma, and adult asthma. Different immunological pathways are likely to be of prime importance in childhood-onset asthma compared to adult-onset asthma, and vitamin D may have less effect on the pathways of prime importance in adult-onset asthma. Alternatively, differences in the capacity of vitamin D to regulate immune responses in children and adults may perhaps reflect establishment of epigenetic responses to chronic vitamin D insufficiency in adults after years of vitamin D deficiency, leading to these individuals having less capacity to respond to vitamin D therapies.<sup>59</sup>

Fourthly whilst the above mechanistic studies show the capacity of vitamin D to beneficially modulate the different pathways thought to underlie different asthma endotypes, it is possible that some of these actions of vitamin D have little clinical efficacy. Therefore vitamin D therapies may be particularly beneficial in discrete endotypes of asthma. The larger RCTs have

not selected for specific asthma endotypes, however, we have shown evidence for a particular role for vitamin D therapy in a severe steroid-resistant asthma endotype.<sup>36 37</sup>

Further large studies of daily vitamin D supplementation to improve asthma control in vitamin D deficient asthmatic children and adults are needed to better understand these issues. Nevertheless, there is increasing realisation that vitamin D deficiency negatively impacts on general health status and that vitamin D supplementation rarely has side-effects. Therefore, optimising vitamin D status is increasingly becoming part of standard holistic clinical care in asthma (see Box 1 for Clinical Recommendations).

#### Box 1: Clinical Recommendations

##### CLINICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Daily supplementation of vitamin D deficient and insufficient patients is safe and has positive benefit to health in asthma and other diseases, but infrequent high-dose bolus supplementation should be avoided.
- Supplementation should be given as Vitamin D3 (cholecalciferol).
- The exact serum 25(OH)D concentration below which supplementation should be started and best dosing regimens remain to be established. We would suggest supplementing those with serum 25(OH)D < 50 nmol/l and starting with a dose of 1000 – 4000 IU/day depending on baseline concentration. Serum vitamin D should be reviewed after a few months of supplementation and if vitamin D sufficiency has not been achieved then the supplementation dose should be increased in order to achieve vitamin D sufficiency.
- Serum vitamin D concentrations should be checked in women planning pregnancy pre-conception and also in all pregnant women, with daily high-dose supplementation given during pregnancy. In those planning pregnancy sufficient vitamin D supplementation should be given to rapidly achieve vitamin D sufficiency.

### **Early life vitamin D and primary prevention of asthma**

Vitamin D deficiency and insufficiency is extremely common in pregnancy, and is associated with preeclampsia, gestational diabetes mellitus and other co-morbidities of pregnancy.<sup>60</sup> It has also been associated with increased respiratory infections, and asthma in the newborn and children in many studies.<sup>61</sup> Vitamin D is proposed to beneficially impact fetal and neonatal lung maturation, as well as immunity in a manner likely to promote maternal-fetal tolerance, and to protect mother and fetus from infection.<sup>61 62</sup> Importantly these associations between maternal vitamin D insufficiency and asthma in the offspring cannot be explained as due to reverse causation although an effect of unmeasured confounding variables in these studies is possible.

The mechanisms by which early life vitamin D could help reduce development of asthma include (i) its capacity to support development of tolerogenic immune responses (as discussed above), (ii) facilitating appropriate antiviral and antibacterial immune responses, (iii) enhancing barrier properties of the epidermis and decreasing eczema, and (iv) enhancing appropriate lung development – all factors important in determining whether an individual develops symptomatic chronic airway disease.<sup>63</sup> In particular *in utero* vitamin D has been shown to affect expression of genes important in early pulmonary development (for example branching morphogenesis) and to influence multiple aspects of later lung development including alveolar development and surfactant secretion.<sup>62 64</sup> These vitamin D regulated developmental processes occur at different times in gestation suggesting multiple vital windows for vitamin D actions at different stages of gestation. Furthermore, as vitamin D research continues an increasing number of asthma-relevant development processes are being revealed to be influenced by vitamin D, for example recent evidence for a likely influence of *in*

388 *utero* vitamin D status on the early-life microbiome.<sup>65</sup>

389 These data, with mechanistic evidence discussed above, has now led to randomised controlled  
390 trials of high-dose vitamin D supplementation as primary prevention to avert the development  
391 of recurrent wheeze and asthma in offspring.

392 Two large RCT, using doses of vitamin D known to significantly increase vitamin D status of  
393 pregnant women,<sup>61</sup> have recently reported similar and encouraging effects on infant  
394 respiratory outcomes. In the COPSAC study, Chawes *et al.*, supplemented pregnant women  
395 with 2800 IU/d vitamin D3 in the third trimester of pregnancy, and reported a reduction in  
396 episodes of troublesome lung symptoms in the offspring through 3-years though no significant  
397 effect on risk of persistent wheeze.<sup>66</sup> In the VDAART trial, Litonjua *et al.*, supplemented with  
398 4400 IU/d vitamin D3 during the second and third trimester, reporting a significant reduction  
399 in allergic sensitizations and a trend for a reduction in recurrent wheeze and asthma in  
400 offspring through 3-years.<sup>67</sup> Importantly, no increase in adverse effects were reported in  
401 these or other comparable pregnancy studies.<sup>60 66 67</sup>

402 In an ancillary study of cord blood samples from a subset of babies born to women within the  
403 VDAART cohort, Hornsby and colleagues show supplementation to significantly enhance pro-  
404 inflammatory cytokine responses to mitogen and TLR-agonist stimulation, increase *TLR2* and  
405 *TLR9* gene expression, and IL-17A secretion in response to T cell receptor-ligation.<sup>68</sup> Thus,  
406 vitamin D supplementation during pregnancy modifies the immune system of the neonate in a  
407 manner that is predicted to protect the host against pathogenic infections and reduce  
408 development of asthma.

409 However, similar methodological issues exist with primary prevention trials of vitamin D to  
410 those discussed above with respect to secondary prevention trials. Stratification of response  
411 by baseline vitamin D status is evident - in secondary analyses of the VDAART study infants  
412 born to high-dose supplemented mothers who had circulating levels of vitamin D of 30ng/ml

or higher at recruitment (sufficiency range) demonstrated a striking and significant reduction in recurrent wheeze and asthma through 3-years. However, infants of high-dose supplemented mothers who were vitamin D deficient at baseline (10-18 weeks gestation) did not have the same significant benefit from randomisation to high-dose vitamin D. This indicates the likelihood of important effects of vitamin D *throughout* neonatal development, likely to include bone, pulmonary and immune effects (as discussed above), and including during the first trimester.<sup>69</sup> It may also suggest that maternal vitamin D deficiency leads to epigenetic changes in the offspring resulting in relative vitamin D resistance.<sup>59</sup> Therefore achieving vitamin D sufficiency needs to be a clinical priority pre-conception. High-dose supplementation in both these trials did not include what appears to be a critical window for vitamin D actions in early pregnancy / pre-conception. Notably this influence of baseline vitamin D status on clinical benefit of vitamin D supplementation to prevent development of asthma is opposite to that noted in the secondary prevention RCTs discussed above.

Secondly, similar to the secondary prevention trials, not all patients in these primary prevention trials achieved vitamin D sufficiency despite high-dose supplementation (75% in the VDAART trial and 81% in the COPSAC trial).<sup>67 66</sup> This underscores the likelihood that different individuals require different doses of vitamin D to achieve sufficiency, however, both trials did note a significant proportion of participants not to have been adequately adherent to the vitamin D intervention. Previously infrequent bolus dosing of vitamin D supplements has been suggested as a strategy to improve adherence but as we discuss above such infrequent bolus dosing may be immunologically problematic.

It is also too early to determine whether high-dose vitamin D supplementation in these primary prevention studies has successfully reduced the proportion of children going on to develop asthma – reported follow-up to date is for up to age 3 whereas asthma is often diagnosed slightly later in childhood. Long-term follow-up of these patients is eagerly awaited.

The longitudinal effects of vitamin D during the first 10 years of life were investigated in a high-risk Australian cohort in order to determine relationships between 25(OH)D levels and susceptibility to allergic sensitization, respiratory tract infections, and asthma.<sup>70</sup> The study showed that 25(OH)D deficiency in early childhood is associated with increased risk for persistent asthma. The authors proposed that vitamin D may act by influencing susceptibility to early allergic sensitization, and/or upper respiratory tract colonization with bacterial pathogens, or both.

Together these very recent studies bring real enthusiasm to investigate strategies that restore vitamin D sufficiency in pregnancy and the first years of life, which offer the potential to reduce both important asthma risk factors, namely allergic sensitizations and respiratory tract infections, as well as asthma itself. A future challenge will be to determine safe and effective regimens of vitamin D3 supplementation in the newborn and infant.

## **Conclusions**

There is a wealth of epidemiological evidence of a detrimental association between vitamin D insufficiency and asthma, and translational studies have shown vitamin D to have the capacity to beneficially regulate diverse aspects of asthma pathology. Methodological considerations with vitamin D randomised controlled trials to-date may underlie less impressive than hoped clinical effects in the trials. Further clinical trials, with revised protocols learning from the issues discussed above, are needed. Nevertheless, the evidence-base increasingly supports vitamin D supplementation being a safe, practical and beneficial part of the comprehensive management of asthma.

## Figure Legends

### Figure 1: Illustrative schematic of the mechanistic pathway of aero-allergen stimulated asthmatic inflammation, and steps at which vitamin D acts.

Vitamin D can act beneficially at multiple steps along the pathway to prevent / reduce asthmatic inflammation.

### Figure 2: Schematic for non-allergic eosinophilic asthmatic inflammation.

Epithelial injury, for instance from proteases or viral infection, stimulates epithelial release of Alarmin cytokines such as IL-25 and IL-33. These cytokines act on immune cells such as ILC2s and mast cells to elicit production of Th2-type cytokines that stimulate eosinophilic inflammation. Vitamin D can inhibit this pathway at multiple steps.

### Figure 3: Diverse stimuli can elicit steroid-resistant asthmatic inflammation

Th17-mediated neutrophilic airways inflammation can follow diverse precipitants such as oxidative stress that are sensitive to modulation by vitamin D. Furthermore, Th17 lymphocytes and neutrophils themselves are also beneficially sensitive to vitamin D.

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allergen stimulated Th2 cells

IgE secreting B cells

activated mast cells

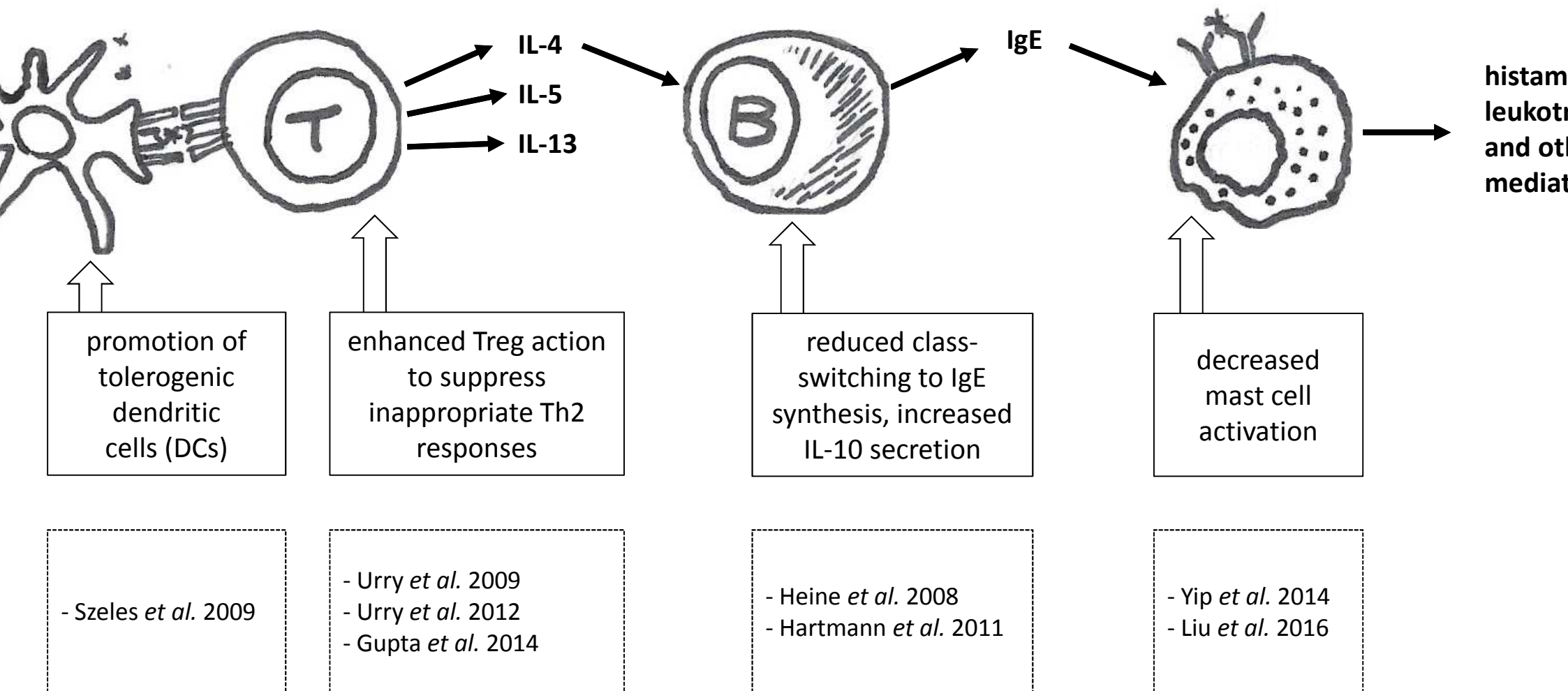
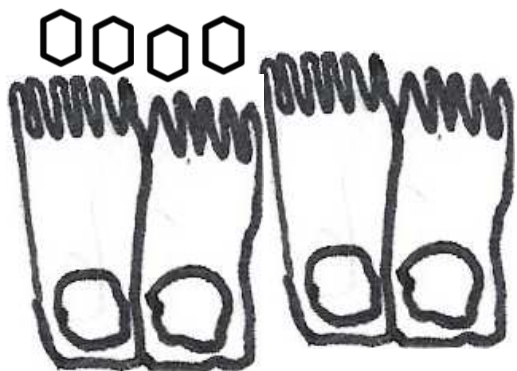


Figure 1

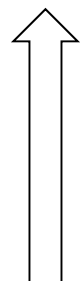
viral stimulated epithelial cells



anti-  
microbial  
actions



modulated  
epithelial  
stimulation  
(anti-inflammatory)

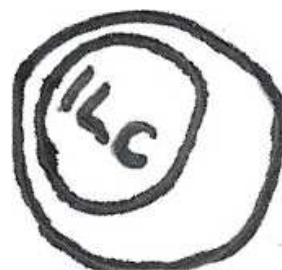


stimulated sST2  
production  
inhibits IL-33  
actions



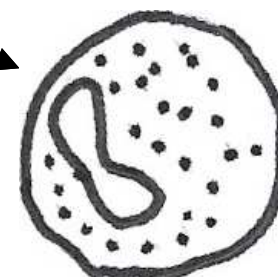
decreased ILC2  
stimulation

stimulated ILC2s



IL-5

activated eosinophils



eosino  
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mediat

- Liu *et al.* 2006  
- Handsottir *et al.* 2010  
- Beard *et al.* 2011  
- Fabri *et al.* 2011

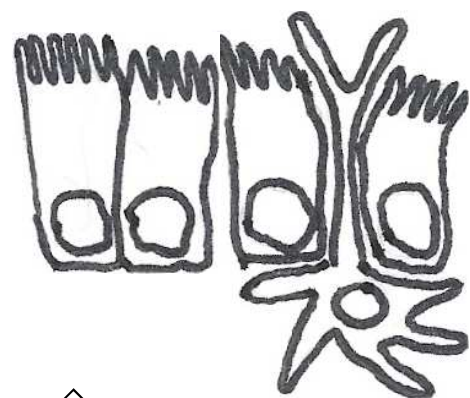
- Pfeffer *et al.* 2015

- Ruiter *et al.* 2015

- Ethier *et al.* 2016

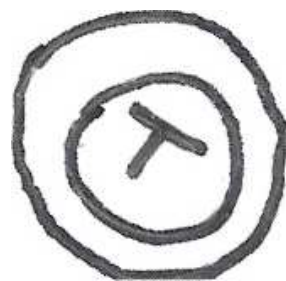
Figure 2

stimulation e.g. bacteria, pollution



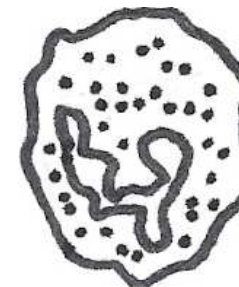
IL-6  
IL-23  
IL-1 $\beta$

stimulated Th17 cells



IL-17

activated neutrophils



neutro  
elastas  
and oth  
mediat



anti-oxidant and  
anti-microbial actions of  
vitamin D



suppression of Th17  
responses and  
enhancement of steroid-  
induced IL-10 secretion



reduced pro-inflammatory  
cytokine production by  
neutrophils but with enhanced  
anti-bacterial activity

- Liu *et al.* 2006  
- Fabri *et al.* 2011  
- Lan *et al.* 2014

- Xystrakis *et al.* 2006  
- Nanzer *et al.* 2014  
- Chambers *et al.* 2015

- Takahashi *et al.* 2002  
- Subramanian *et al.* 2017

Figure 3